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POISONING IN INDIA.

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ONE of the most memorable acts of Lord William Bentinck's administration in India was the abolition of Thuggee. In carrying out the suppression of this remarkable organisation of fanatical and hereditary assassins, he was mainly assisted by the late Sir William—then Captain—Sleeman, who, by his extraordinary energy and intelligence, constructed and maintained a department which succeeded in ultimately tracing out and hunting down the gangs of murderers so completely, that the practice of Thuggee is now virtually extinct, the last conviction for this crime in the North-West Provinces having taken place about the year 1852.

This remarkable brotherhood of murderers and robbers is reported to have sprung into existence under the first Mahomedan dynasties, and has prevailed throughout India ever since, up to about 1860. In Akbar's reign as many as five hundred were caught and executed; but it is said to have been really of much more ancient origin, and that the evil doings of Thugs are represented in the bas-reliefs of the Temples of Ellora.

It seems to have become prominently known to the British, after the fall of Seringapatam in 1799, and until hunted down and extirminated by Sir W. Sleeman and the able officers who assisted and succeeded him, it was practised throughout India. By about the year 1860 it had become practically exterminated. The Thugs had been tracked, caught, convicted, and hanged or imprisoned. Some were kept as approvers, their lives being spared on condition of their giving information which enabled the authorities to detect and convict others. They were kept in confinement in dépôts (Goinda-Khanas) in Jubbulpore,

Lucknow, Lahore, and other places; and contributed largely to the identification of their ancient comrades and fellow miscreants.

Thugs were of all castes of Hindus as well as Mahomedans, united, despite the difference in their creeds, in the worship of Kali; whilst after each murder a solemn sacrifice was made to the destructive deity by Hindus and Mahomedans alike. Their mode of destroying life was by strangulation; the victim was inveigled into their company, and when they sat down to eat, at a given signal one of the band, specially trained for the duty, passed a handkerchief (roomal) rapidly round the neck from behind, and by a firm and rapid twist strangled the unsuspecting victim, who was then buried on or near the spot. His companions, if he had any, were also destroyed and their property taken and distributed, something being set apart for religious purposes and votive offerings. "They travelled in bands, disguised as merchants or pilgrims, and were bound to the association by an oath based on the rites of the bloody goddess Kali." A fanatical association of murderers, they practised their fearful occupation in accordance with a religion founded on robbery and murder, and worshipped the pickaxe with which they dug the graves of their victims. They had signs and a vocabulary by which they recognised each other, and by which also they gave the signal of death.

In nine years, Dr. Balfour tells us, more than 2,000 were arrested; 1,467 were convicted of the murder of 947 persons; of these, 382 were hanged, 919 transported, 77 imprisoned for life, 92 for varying periods, 20 acquitted or escaped, 31 died whilst under trial, 250 were admitted as king's evidence. Some of them confessed with pride to over two hundred murders. Of those captured, the Bhutote or actual strangler was always hanged.

These strangling Thugs, called Phansigars (noose men) were distributed over India from the Himalayas to Cape Cormorin, and scarcely any part of the peninsula was exempt from their operations. They abstained, as a rule, from the murder of women, carriers of Ganges water, low caste persons, musicians, dancers, fakeers and Sikhs, but these too would be sacrificed if they witnessed the crime, and thus became a source of danger.

This widespread system of murder and theft has, through the determined and persistent action of the British Govern-

ment, aided by a band of well-qualified officers—among whom may be specially named as most conspicuous the Sleemans, Hervey Meadows Taylor, and Gould Weston—been now suppressed as far as the strangling Thugs are concerned; but the destructive instinct is still active where unrestrained by fear of penalties, and numbers of lives still fall victims to poisoning, not only ordinary individuals who are murdered for revenge or robbery or other reasons, or those who commit suicide, but others, destroyed by another variety or sect of Thugs, who, from using the datura plant as a lethal agent, have received the name of Daturiahs, and who pursue their nefarious trade of robbing and often murder of travellers or others on the roads or in towns and villages.

It would appear that since the suppression of Thuggee by strangulation, poisoning has become more frequent, though this also, under the active and vigorous administration of the British Government, is diminishing.

Chevers, writing in 1856, and again in 1870, says the crime, which appears to have become more prevalent since the check given to Thuggee by strangulation, is common throughout the three Presidencies of India. It is pursued systematically as a trade, and in great probability those who practise it are Thugs in the commonly received acceptance of the term; but he adds there is no positive evidence identifying the Meetawalla of Bengal and the up-country Daturiahs with the true Thugs or Phansigars. The term Meetawalla (sweetmeat man) was given to a class of robbers and poisoners who administered the poison concealed in sweetmeats, of which natives are so fond. The poison was not, however, always given for the purpose of destroying life, but with the intention of stupefying, and thus facilitating robbery or other crime against the person.

In 1844 Colonel Sleeman wrote that the impunity with which this crime was everywhere perpetrated was among the greatest evils with which the country at that time was afflicted. These poisoners were then as numerous over the Madras and Bombay Presidencies as in Bengal. No road was free from them, and he believed that throughout India there must be many hundreds who gained their subsistence by that trade alone.

There is good reason for believing that poisoning is not by any means confined to these professional murderers or Thugs, but that it is a common form of crime arising out

of the mental constitution of a timid race who, except when roused into a state of frantic excitement, are apt to prefer treachery to violence in the commission of crime; and that the profusion of lethal agents furnished by the variety of deadly plants, and the unrestricted freedom with which the most potent kinds of poison, whether mineral or organic, can be obtained in the bazaars, together with their familiarity with the use of hemp or opium, sufficiently accounts for the prevalence of the crime of secret poisoning.

No one who has lived long in India can have failed to observe the vigilance and perseverance with which the police authorities, aided by the scientific knowledge of the medical officers, are battling with this important element in its criminal records; and there is good reason for believing that their labours are not without success, and that not only the crime, but the demoralisation which prompts it, is on the wane.

The valuable works of Waring, O'Shaughnessy, Chevers, Lyon, K. L. Dey, Dymock, and many others have made us acquainted with the various mineral and vegetable substances which have made the crime so easy; and have taught the methods of detection so well that the ever vigilant police are enabled to trace out and procure conviction in a large number of cases, and thus to render the risk to the malefactors so great as to deter from much crime which otherwise would be but too certainly committed.

In a brief notice of this kind it is not possible to do more than glance at even the most important of these poisons—even to name them all would exceed available space.

Among vegetable poisons one much in use for criminal purposes is the datura (*Datura fastuosa*). This plant is common in India, and the natives are very familiar with its effects as an intoxicant and death-dealing drug; so common has been its use for criminal purposes that it has given its name to the class who use it—the Daturiahs are regarded as the successors of the Phansigars or stranglers; and, indeed, though no direct connection has been traced in their relations to each other, it is very probable that as the strangling was suppressed, murder for the purposes of robbery and fanaticism was relegated to the datura, and the infamous occupation carried on with this less easily detectable agent. But this drug also, no doubt, has long been in use for the more vulgar and commonplace robbery where the intention was not that of destroying life, but of

hocussing, so as to enable theft to be more easily committed, the victim being left in a state of stupor or unconsciousness, to recover or die as the case might be, death no doubt being frequently accelerated, if not caused, by exposure to the sun's rays and vicissitudes of weather.

The datura has three species: *D. fastuosa*, a purple flower; *D. alba*, a white flower; *D. stramonium*. The first is the one in most common use, and is perhaps the most active; it is given in various ways, the seed being the usual form in which it is administered for poisoning purposes. A box containing some preparations taken from a professional poisoner contained: 1, datura seeds; 2, powdered seeds fit to mix with food; 3, distilled essence of datura used with sugar, tobacco, flour; 4, flour mixed with datura flour. This poison, no doubt, is used frequently for the purpose of drugging only, and not with the intention of destroying life. Dr. Burton Brown, of Lahore, records 20 deaths in 92 cases, Harvey 20 deaths in 123 cases, Bombay Analyser 24 in 138 cases of datura poisoning.

But though datura has attained such an evil reputation as being the drug used by a class of road poisoners, it is not by any means so frequent a cause of death as some other drugs. The two poisons most commonly used being opium and arsenic; next to these probably may be placed datura; but, as before stated, it is more used for the purposes of drugging and theft than for murder, though it frequently proves fatal. Lyon tells us that in the year 1884 over 90 per cent. of the deaths from poison reported to the chemical examiner were due to either opium or arsenic; and during the ten years ending in 1884, these poisons caused over 72 per cent. of the cases, and more than 87 per cent. of the deaths from poison reported to the Bombay chemical examiner. Arsenious oxide is used both for homicidal and suicidal purposes, and largely also as a cattle poison. Here it may be remarked that the jequirity or *abrus precatorius* is not infrequently used as cattle poison. Except for infanticide and suicide, opium is not so much used homicidally.

Other vegetable poisons are aconite, oleander, *nux vomica*, and various *euphorbias*. The seeds of *cerbera thetiva* are sometimes used as a cattle poison, whilst the *euphorbias* and the *plumbago rosea* are used, sometimes with fatal consequences, as local irritants to produce abortion, but there are several others known to and used by

the natives for the purpose of poisoning for revenge, for causing abortion, or even for suicide, but those previously mentioned are the most commonly resorted to. Again, among mineral poisons well known to and procurable in the bazaars, are compounds of copper, cases of poisoning frequently occurring accidentally from contamination of food by the copper cooking vessels.

The cyanides and other poisons known to science cause occasional deaths, but they are not those in common use, and are not specially characteristic of poisoning in India. The chemical examiners' reports for 1884 give the following statement for ten years ending 1884, in Bombay.

Arsenic ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	507
Opium ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	151
Datura ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	74
Copper ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	50
Mercury...	...	...	...	...	...	...	29
Lead ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	19
Other metals ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5
Pounded glass ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	31
Strychnine ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	17
Oleander ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8
Aconite ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6
Alcohol ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6
Plumbago ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6
Cucurbitaceous tubers...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5
Oxalic acid ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4
Acid and alkaline corrosives ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3
Cyanides ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3
Other poisons ...	...	...	...	...	...	...	23
							947

Lead poisoning is comparatively rare in India ; preparations of mercury are not infrequently the cause of poisoning in the forms of calomel and corrosive sublimate ; but as before stated, arsenious acid is the mineral poison best known and most used.

Deaths from Poison, shown in the Chemical Examiners' Reports for the Year 1884.

	Arsenic.	Opium.	Datura.	Other.	Total.
Bengal ...	22	53	—	8	83
Madras ...	19	4	—	8	31
Bombay ...	22	9	1	3	35
Punjab ...	45	18	1	1	65
N.W. Provinces	29	17	1	1	48

In the Bombay Presidency in ten years ending 1884, the chemical analyser reports :

					Poisoned.		Deaths.
Arsenic	...	...	...	...	652	...	305
Opium	...	...	...	...	142	...	131
Datura	...	...	...	...	146	...	22
Other poisons	...	...	...	...	155	...	42*
					<hr/>		<hr/>
					1,095		500

* Eight of these from strychnine and four from oxalic acid.

Cattle Poisoning in India in 1884, reported by Chemical Examiners.

Bengal	...	...	...	...	...	...	41
Madras	...	...	...	...	...	...	38
Bombay	...	...	...	...	...	...	51
Punjab	...	...	...	...	...	...	147
N. W. Provinces	...	...	...	...	...	...	11
							<hr/>
							288

Cattle Poisoning in Bombay Presidency detected in Ten Years ending in 1884.

Arsenious oxide	...	...	...	...	...	696
Arsenious oxide with sulphides	...	...	...	...	...	9
Arsenious oxides with oxides of lead	...	...	...	...	...	9
Sulphides of arsenic only	...	...	...	...	...	11
Oxides of lead only	...	...	...	...	...	6
Sulphate of copper	...	...	...	...	...	6
Nux vomica	...	...	...	...	...	1
Cocculus indicus	...	...	...	...	...	3
Mercury...	...	...	...	...	...	1
Sulphate of iron	...	...	...	...	...	1
						<hr/>
						743

Altogether 677 animals died from poison in ten years.

The statistics are not at present accessible by which could be shown the mortality from poisoning, intentional for homicide, drugging and robbery, suicidal, accidental ; but sufficient has been said to show that it is considerable ; and if to this be added the deaths from snake bite, which at the lowest estimate are over 20,000 a year for all India, it is plain that the mortality from various forms of poisoning is very considerable.

The subject in all its aspects is well known to the authorities, and it may be confidently asserted that whatever is possible by the vigilance of police and the science of medicine is being done to abate the evil, and there is good reason to believe that it is being gradually mitigated.

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